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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/02/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR SOCI TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: BERDIMUHAMEDOV'S NEW YEAR
DINNER-CABARET -- SIMPLE PLEASURES, MILD POLITICAL SATIRE,
LITTLE ALCOHOL

Classified By: CHARGE RICHARD E. HOAGLAND FOR REASONS 1.4 (B), (D)

¶1. (SBU) President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov's December 28 New Year party provided a glimpse of his government at work -- and at play. The Ministry of Culture and Broadcasting organized it as a dinner-cabaret (to be televised later) in the south wing of the central Exhibition Palace. Guests included the deputy chairmen of the Cabinet of Ministers (equivalent to deputy prime ministers), ministers and their deputies, heads of state agencies, members of Parliament, chairmen of public organizations and state enterprises, the diplomatic corps, and TV and movie stars past and present.

A WINTER WONDERLAND

¶2. (U) Set designers transformed the three-story atrium-like space into a winter wonderland of white-silk snow drifts, blue-lit New Year trees, and an elaborately designed and expansive stage at the opposite end from the head table. The first and second balconies held TV cameras and various lighting effects, including sweeping green laser lights and multi-colored strobes.

¶3. (SBU) Guests were told to arrive at 4:00 pm for the planned 5:00 pm event, but Berdimuhamedov didn't arrive until nearly 6:00 pm. (NOTE: Until very recently, guests at presidential events were customarily told to arrive 20 minutes early for security check, and the president was always punctual to the minute. However, for the recent opening of the UN Preventive Diplomacy Center, guests were told to arrive at 9:30am for the 10:00am opening. The President showed up at 9:40am, and only four diplomats were present to be filmed greeting Berdimuhamedov. The others, embarrassingly, showed up several minutes later. According to subsequent press reports, Berdimuhamedov spent extra time, right before the New Year's party, playing with children at

the lighting of the national New Year tree on the plaza in front of the Presidential Palace, and then decided to walk the two blocks to the Exhibition Palace, further delaying his arrival. (END NOTE.) During the two-hour wait for the president, the master of ceremonies, a well-known TV variety-show star in a black cut-velvet dinner jacket, imperiously went to each ambassador who had been invited to offer a toast and laid down the law that the toast could not be more than 60 seconds, and shorter would be better.

¶4. (SBU) When the president finally arrived, he walked down the red carpet to Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" played by flanking teenaged violinists, saxophonists, and an electric keyboard. Still wearing his overcoat, he sauntered into the dinner hall and feigned surprise for the TV cameras.

WHO RANKS

¶5. (SBU) At the head table, the same size as the other round tables (although the fruit plate held two extra pineapples and the fish appetizer plate had real smoked salmon rather than smoked whitefish), Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov sat to his left looking lordly, and to his right were Speaker of Parliament Akja Nurberdiyeva and Deputy Prime Minister of Oil and Gas Tachberdi Tagiyev. At the table to the president's left were the power ministers -- defense, security, interior, presidential guard -- all in business suits rather than uniforms. At the table to the president's right were the other deputy prime ministers.

CAVIAR CARPE DIEM

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¶6. (C) Charge was seated at the next table to the deputy prime ministers with the outgoing and incoming diplomatic doyens and the Russian and UAE ambassadors. During the final hour of the wait for the president to appear, incoming doyen Kyrgyz Ambassador Zarylbek Akmatbekov started passing around the caviar, advising, "Eat it now. It's free. It won't last." And to prove his point, he scooped up a third of it. Russian Ambassador Igor Blatov pointedly laid his Dunhill Blue cigarettes and gold lighter on the table, but the waiters didn't bring an ash tray because smoking is forbidden in public. During the dinner, he made several smoke-trips to the men's room -- also forbidden but generally tolerated.

¶7. (U) The show (and dinner) finally started with several very credible arias from Italian opera and Gershwin, followed by a Russian balalaika band and then two traditional Turkmen folk songs.

SIMPLY HAPPY NEW YEAR

¶8. (SBU) The lights came back up and it was time for the diplomats' toasts. Russia, China, the UAE, and Japan droned on interminably, despite the master of ceremonies' admonition, from their prepared texts about GDPs, trade figures, and cultural relations. For the first time, the Charge was asked to offer a toast in public, suggesting the waning power of outgoing doyen Armenian Ambassador Armen Grigoryan, who had always previously cast non-accredited charges into socio-diplomatic outer darkness. Drawing a laugh from the president and the audience by repeating the master of ceremonies' admonition about brevity, Charge simply noted it had been an extraordinary year for U.S.-Turkmenistan relations, that we firmly support the president's reforms, and wished him, his government, and all the people of Turkmenistan peace, health, happiness, success, and prosperity in the new year.

WELCOME TO THE CATSKILLS ON THE CASPIAN

¶9. (SBU) The rest of the programmed entertainment during the long, long evening, was song-skits. TV professionals performed most of them, comedy songs with topical references

verging on very mild political satire -- much like vaudeville skits from the turn of the 20th century, even with all the standard characters of that genre, including the dopey fat guy -- c.f., Laurel and Hardy. (NOTE: Russian-Soviet middle-brow theater skits were almost all based on 19th-century Jewish popular theater, and elite Turkmen culture is Russian-Soviet to the core. END NOTE.) The deputy prime ministers and ministers were on the edges of their chairs with delight. Two guest-of-honor elderly actors, one male and one female, read long, long poems praising Turkmen history and culture.

REELING IN THE BIG FISH

¶10. (C) Most interesting for an outside observer was that government groups performed two of the song-skits. Minister of Textile Industry (and Niyazov-era political prisoner) Jemal Goklenova, who has an increasingly high public profile, led a vamping fashion show performed by her deputies and department heads, with the men playing as fey as possible (suggesting slightly risque comedy indeed exists in post-police-state Turkmenistan). The ministers, chairmen, and directors of the oil and gas sector, all draped in tinsel garland and led by State Hydrocarbon Agency Executive Director Bayrammurat Muradov, performed the famous Russian fairytale of catching the goldfish, with real fishing rods

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and a big plastic goldfish, and turned it into a political statement about "reeling in the big international contracts."

¶11. (C) An hour of traditional Central Asian circle dancing followed the skits, led first by the impossibly tall and willowy official "hostess-models" who are at nearly every high-level public event. The decidedly drunk outgoing diplomatic doyen hit hard on Deputy Prime Minister of Culture, TV Broadcasting, and Press Maysa Yazmuhammedova to try to get her to dance. She politely but adamantly refused, and the male deputy prime ministers firmly ushered Ambassador Grigoryan back to his table where he draped a napkin over his head.

NO ALCOHOL, PLEASE

¶12. (C) Toward the end of the evening, President Berdimuhamedov, along with Foreign Minister Meredov (who increasingly appears, at least in public, to be Number Two), made the rounds of the VIP tables, stopping to speak with each diplomat and minister. When they stopped to chat with the Charge, Meredov commented, "Perfect toast." The president asked, "Is everything OK with you?" Charge replied, "Yes, Mr. President, but I'd like to have better access to your ministers." Berdimuhamedov responded, "Well, why not?" Meredov winced. (NOTE: His MFA, along with the Ministry of Security, controls access. END NOTE.)

¶13. (C) Each of the VIP guests offered the president a toast as he stopped to chat, but he simply put his one glass of red wine to his lips for each toast, and by the end of his rounds of the entire room, the glass was only half empty. Meredov did not carry a glass. The day before, the Foreign Ministry had returned the Embassy's New Year gratuity of California wine, noting "The Foreign Minister does not accept alcohol."

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) As the departing crowd shivered in the unusual cold wave and waited at curb-side for the swarm of black Mercedes and diplomatic limos to pull up, a European charge commented, "It was rather both pre-modern and post-modern, wasn't it." Yes. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND